

# RUTH: REDEEMING THE MESS

ruth 1.6-22: almighty and all good

## Questions for Personal Study

Take some time to compare your life to Naomi's. What is your mess?  
When life is hard, how does it affect your view of God? Why?  
How is God present in Naomi's and Ruth's lives? How do you see his hand?  
How does the cross help us in times of hardship & suffering?  
Has anything made you bitter? What is the solution to bitterness?

## Questions for Study in Community

Read Ruth 1 aloud together. What surprises you about the story so far?  
Discuss the bitterness of Naomi. Is it warranted? Why or why not?  
Read 2 Cor 4.16-18. How do we practice this truth in real life?  
Ruth is saved through Naomi's suffering. What do you make of that?

## Questions for Staying on Mission

Last week, we defined who are neighbors are. Any further insights on that?  
Read 2 Cor. 4.7-12. How do you see this in Naomi and Ruth?  
Discuss: To serve our neighbors, we must embrace the "dying" of Jesus.  
Where are you giving up your life & resources to be a blessing to others?  
Spend some time planning how you can bless them this summer together.

## Thoughts for Parents

Each night this week, either around the dinner table or before bed, take some time to read and explain the story of Ruth 1 to your kids. Here are some ideas for discussion and teaching. Always point them to Jesus and his grace!  
Recount why Elimelech was a foolish father & husband. Let the kids help!  
Discuss the bitterness of Naomi & how she doesn't see what God is doing.  
Read Heb 12.15 & discuss how bitterness "springs up" and causes trouble.  
Talk about how God forgives our sin and heals our bitterness in Jesus.  
Read Ruth's speech (v.16-18) & discuss Ruth's courageous faith.  
Discuss the meanings of the names, especially Naomi's name change (v.20).  
Read v.6 & v.22 & talk about how God is at work behind the scenes.  
Thank God for the cross where we see how much God hates sin & loves us!

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## The Mess We've Made

The opening lines of the book of Ruth are very bleak. Elimelech, though his name means "my God is King," acts as his own king and makes the foolish decision to move his family out of the Promised land to one of the most godless places on earth, Moab. Though he moves there to avoid the famine in Bethlehem (most likely a sign of God's judgment against the faithlessness of his people), Elimelech dies in Moab, his sons marry pagan girls, and then they die, too, leaving Naomi destitute, a stranger in a foreign land, with only her daughters-in-law to comfort her. Her life is a tragic mess and she is without hope.

## Sovereign And Good

But into these bleak circumstances comes a glimmer of hope: Naomi hears a rumor that the Lord has visited his people and given them bread, so she makes the first good decision of the story and begins her journey home. In our first introduction to Yahweh, who is the hero of this story, we see that he is a God of mercy and grace who comes to his people with provision and draws their hearts back to to him through his kindness. Though Naomi has experienced great tragedy, she recognizes that the best place to go is to run to God and to God's people in Bethlehem.

The key question of this passage is how Naomi will interpret her experience of tragedy. In the ensuing dialogue with her daughters-in-law, we see that Naomi, like many of us, is a mixed bag of faith and distrust in God. On one hand, she confesses that God is all-powerful. He is the one who is ultimately responsible for the tragic mess her life has become. She affirms that God is sovereign, ruling and reigning over the details and events of our lives. Biblically, God's sovereignty does not mean that everything that happens is his will; indeed, many things happen every day that are expressly *not* his will. It was not his will that Elimelech ran from God and his sin; it was not his will that Mahlon and Chilion married pagan girls who did not worship God; it was not his will that Naomi's husband and sons died leaving her with absolutely nothing. Foolishness and sin and death are not God's will. And yet, Naomi rightly confesses

that God allowed these things to happen. In his sovereign authority, God chose not stop these events, though he could have. God's sovereignty means that while he may not cause everything to happen, ultimately everything must pass through his hands, and he chooses to act or not act, to bless or to curse.

But what Naomi fails to confess is God's goodness. God is not only all powerful and almighty, he is also all good. In her prayer for Ruth and Orpah, Naomi uses the word "kindness" to describe God's actions. The Hebrew word so translated is *hesed*, and it is difficult to translate into one English word. It is a word that sums up God's goodness, and is often translated as his "loving-kindness." God's *hesed* is his faithful commitment to bless his people, his gracious and merciful stance towards us, and his patient and enduring love for us despite our rebellion against him. So, while she can pray God's kindness on her daughters-in-law, she doesn't believe in His kindness towards her.

Naomi does what we are so often guilty of: we judge God's heart towards us based on our circumstances. Naomi has looked at the bleakness of her life, the tragic mess that it has become, and has decided that her circumstances tell the whole story about who God is. "The hand of the Lord has gone out against me. The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. The Lord has testified against me and brought calamity upon me." In fact, this view of God has so embittered her that she actually encourages Ruth and Orpah to go back to Maob and worship their false gods (1.15)! Because God has not served her purposes, provided all her desires, and conformed His will to hers, she has concluded that God is *not* good. It is a familiar tune, replayed daily in our churches and city.

### **The Cost of Worshiping God**

In her bitterness, Naomi attempts to dissuade Ruth and Orpah from coming with her to Bethlehem. Naomi confesses she has no hope, and nothing to offer Ruth or Orpah, and that if they came with her they would only be a constant reminder of how God has attacked her. While Orpah is persuaded to return to Moab, Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. In her famous speech - often used at weddings because it conveys such deep commitment - Ruth pledges herself not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi's people and to Naomi's God. In fact, the language she uses in this confession is the language of conversion; in other words, Ruth is becoming a believer in God! Though God has allowed much that is tragic into Naomi's life, he is still very much at work in a redemptive and life-transforming way. Though Naomi makes it clear she has nothing to offer, Ruth

insists on coming to Bethlehem. For this young Moabite, the choice between have nothing in Bethlehem but God himself or having a future in Moab without God is a simple decision. Although becoming a worshiper of the one true God offers no promise of material security, and though Naomi repeatedly insists that God is not good, Ruth makes the courageous decision to trust God anyway. In a fascinating turn of events, Naomi finally stops talking and she and Ruth start again toward Bethlehem.

### **Sovereign Goodness Today**

Many people have a mistaken view of God's relation to the mess of life. On one hand, in order to affirm God's sovereignty, some people view life fatalistically, believing that everything that happens is directly caused by God and concluding, therefore, that he is responsible for sin and evil in the world. On the other hand, in order to affirm that God hates evil, some people believe that God can't stop evil or wickedness in the world, and that he is as surprised and saddened by it as we. While both views have some truth in them, neither describe the full Biblical picture and are therefore damaging perspectives to try to live in.

Naomi, for her part, is not free from bitterness until the end of the story when she sees how God has worked through the tragic circumstances of her life to weave a story of redemption. Only then can she look back and see how God's sovereignty combined with his *hesed* to rule over tragic events and use them to his good ends. In this, we are pointed forward to the cross of Jesus where we see the fullest picture of the true nature of God. He is a sovereign God who hates evil, sin, and the wickedness of this world, and is fully intent on judging the world for its rebellion against him. And, at the very same time, he is the God of *hesed*, graciously and mercifully offering his own Son Jesus to pay for our sin, to remove our shame, and to restore us to joyful friendship with Him again.

We must learn to see the hardships and difficulties of life through the lens of the cross. While it does not answer all the "why" questions we may have about tragedy in our lives, the cross demonstrates that God is sovereign over the events and graciously at work in and through them for his glory and our joy. Many of the great saints of the church have called the hardships they experienced "sanctified afflictions," confessing that since God is both sovereign and good he must allow these afflictions for our good, in order to humble us, soften us, and form in us His character. In faith, we can learn to agree with Paul: "This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory."